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## RAMSAY AS A PLAGIARIST

IN THE *Annual Report* of the American Historical Association for 1899, is a review of Gordon's history of the American Revolution.<sup>1</sup> From the evidence given there and from evidence since accumulated there seems to be no doubt whatever that Gordon can no longer be accepted as an authority in American history.<sup>2</sup> In Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution*,<sup>3</sup> we find abundant evidence that the plagiarism which destroyed the value of Gordon's work is present also in the writing of his illustrious contemporary. In his preface to this work, dated October 30, 1789, Ramsay says: "The materials for the following sheets were collected in the years 1782, 1783, 1785 and 1786 in which years, as a member of Congress, I had access to all the official papers of the United States. Every letter written to Congress by General Washington, from the day he took the command of the American army till he resigned it, was carefully perused and its contents noted.

<sup>1</sup> *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America*. Four vols., London, 1788.

<sup>2</sup> About the same time, I published in the *Proceedings* of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences and Arts (Vol. XIII. 419-425), a further study of Revolutionary material, going to show that five anonymous histories, published near the time when Gordon was published, were all copied, more or less closely, from the British *Annual Register*, whose authorship, at least of the American part, has been ascribed to Edmund Burke. The titles of these volumes are as follows: *An History of the War with America, France, Spain and Holland, begun in the year 1775 and ended in 1783*. Printed in the year 1787; *An Impartial History of the War in America between Great Britain and her Colonies*. London, 1780; *The History of the War in America between Great Britain and her Colonies*. Dublin, 1779; *The History of the Origin, Rise and Progress of the War in America between Great Britain and her Colonies*. Boston, 1780; *An Impartial History of the War in America between Great Britain and the United States from its Commencement to the End of the War*. Boston, 1781. The appendix to Russell's *History of America*, London, 1778, is largely borrowed from the *Annual Register*. To the same source must be ascribed in large part the *History of the British Empire, containing an Impartial History of the Origin, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*. By a Society of Gentlemen. Philadelphia, 1798. Serial accounts of the Revolution in the *Columbian Magazine and Monthly Miscellany*, Phila., 1790-1792, and in the *Monthly Register*, South Carolina, 1804-1805, have a like origin. Most noteworthy of these smaller histories is Murray's *Impartial History of the Present War in America*, 1778, 1779, the material of which was borrowed in large measure from the *Annual Register*.

<sup>3</sup> The edition used was published in London, 1793.

The same was done with the letters of the other general officers, ministers of Congress, and others in public stations." He tells us further that in order to save space he does not give the authorities for the statements. He closes with the remark: "Intentional misrepresentations, I am sure there are none. If there are any from other sources, I trust they will be found in small circumstances, not affecting the substance." The three main points he makes are his preparation to write history, his reason for not giving his authorities and his assertion of his utmost effort to be accurate.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately the evidence is only too clear that Ramsay plagiarized a large part of this history from either Gordon or the *Annual Register*. To show this it will be necessary only to make some parallel quotations from all these works. In the note below is given a triple quotation regarding the general situation in the American colonies at the breaking out of the Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Ramsay is very much like Gordon in his use of the *Annual Register* for original documents or rather for second-hand summaries of them. In attempting to give the substance of the resolutions of the Suffolk County Convention he follows the *Register* so closely that he puts the wording of the 4th resolution into the close of the preamble.<sup>3</sup> In another place he makes the Salem address to Governor Gage close with the last phrase quoted from it by

<sup>1</sup> "For the entire period covered by this chapter I find no narrative apparently more just or opinions more candidly expressed, than in Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution*. Remote from the scene of conflict, Ramsay shared the passions of neither party." Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History*, VI. 67. "The Revolution Impending," by Mellen Chamberlain.

<sup>2</sup> *Annual Register*, 1775, p. 10, c. 1-2.

The people of America at this time, with respect to political opinions, might in general be divided into two great classes. Of these one was for rushing headlong into the greatest extremities. . . . The other, if less numerous, was not less respectable and though more moderate was perhaps equally firm. . . .

We however acknowledge a third party which were the friends to the administration in England, or, more properly those who did not totally disapprove of its measures; but their still, small voice was so low that except in a very few particular places it could scarcely be distinguished.

Gordon, I. 378-379. The people may be divided into two great classes. One is for rushing headlong into the greatest extremities. . . . There is a third party, who are friends to the British administration, or, rather, who do not totally disapprove of its measures; but their voice is so low that except in a few particular places it can scarcely be distinguished.

Ramsay, I. 125. The inhabitants of the colonies at this time with regard to political opinions might be divided into three classes; of these one was for rushing precipitately into extremities. . . . Another party equally respectable, both as to character, property and patriotism, was more moderate but not less firm. . . . A third class disapproved of what was generally going on. . . . All these latter classes for the most part lay still, while the friends of liberty acted with spirit.

<sup>3</sup> Ramsay, I. 128. For the resolution Boston *Evening Post*, September 19, 1774.

the *Annual Register* and by Gordon, though the phrase in question was actually at a considerable distance from the close of the address. A slight difference in wording also shows where he obtained his material.<sup>1</sup> In October the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts sent a memorial to General Gage. Ramsay describes the preparation and presentation of this memorial but he does not consult the contemporary newspapers or the original document. As can be seen from the memorial itself no such words as *apology* or *apologize* occur in it.<sup>2</sup> A comparison of a small portion of the accounts in the *Annual Register*, in Gordon, and in Ramsay will show the true situation.<sup>3</sup> One further illustration from Ramsay's Massachusetts material will suffice to prove the case against him. In Gage's answer to the memorial of the Provincial Congress he said: "It is surely highly exasperating as well as ungenerous even to hint that the Lives, Liberties, or Properties of any Person except avowed Enemies are in danger from Britons; . . . It is my duty, therefore, to warn you of the rock you are upon."<sup>4</sup> If we compare with this contemporary document the narrative of Ramsay we shall see that it differs strikingly from the original but resembles the *Annual Register*.<sup>5</sup>

Ramsay follows the *Annual Register* for his account of Burgoyne's campaign, in fact he seems to have copied the *Register* in most of the cases where Gordon had done so. The tragedy of Jane McCrea is the most striking incident of this campaign. The

<sup>1</sup> Ramsay, I. 124. See also Gordon, I. 374, and *Annual Register*, 1775, pp. 8-9. For the original address see Boston *Evening Post*, June 20, 1774, p. 2, c. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Massachusetts Gazette*, October 17, 1774, pp. 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Memorial to Gen. Gage from Massachusetts Provincial Congress.

*Annual Register*, 1775, p. 20, c. 2. Among their earliest proceedings they appointed a committee to wait upon the governor with a remonstrance in which they apologized for their present meeting, by representing that the distressed and miserable state of the colony had rendered it etc.

Gordon, I. 411-412. They proceeded to appoint a committee to wait upon the governor with a remonstrance in which they apologize for their meeting, from the distressed state of the colony.

Ramsay, I. 129. One of their first acts was to appoint a committee to wait on the Governor with a remonstrance in which they apologized for their meeting, from the distressed state of the colony.

<sup>4</sup> *Massachusetts Gazette*, October 24, 1774, p. 2, c. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Annual Register*, 1775, p. 21. c. 1. He expressed great indignation that an idea should be formed, that the lives, liberties or property of any people, except avowed enemies should be in danger from English troops . . . he therefore warned them of the rocks they were upon.

Ramsay, I. 129. He replied by expressing his indignation at the supposition "That the lives, liberties, or property of any people, except enemies, could be in danger from English troops" . . . He therefore warned them of the rocks they were upon.

parallel quotations in the foot-note show how Ramsay copied.<sup>1</sup> In the André affair a very excellent illustration is to be found of the complex plagiarism of Gordon's and Ramsay's accounts. The narrative of the *Annual Register* follows quite closely in some parts the account given by Hamilton in a letter to Col. Laurens.<sup>2</sup> We are not left to conjecture this from internal evidence for at the close a warm tribute is paid to Hamilton for the generosity of his treatment of André in this letter. Ramsay seems to have copied equally from Gordon and the *Annual Register* and does not show evidence of having had Hamilton's letter at all. The parallel passages will show these points.<sup>3</sup> As a further illustration of Ramsay's methods of securing material we might mention the case of Arnold's letter to Washington pleading for the life of André. He very clearly does not use Arnold's letter<sup>4</sup> but instead copies the very close transcript of the letter in the *Annual Register*. It is only by a close examination of the text that it becomes clear which Ramsay used, the original or the copy.<sup>5</sup>

As far as accounts of northern affairs were concerned it seems proved that Ramsay must be considered as wholly unreliable as an authority. There is some degree of excuse for this; but when we come into the southern states themselves we naturally expect him to depend more upon original sources, but again we are disappointed for his plagiarism is still apparent. In his account of the operations

<sup>1</sup> *Annual Register*, 1777, p. 156. The friends of the royal cause as well as its enemies were equally victims to their indiscriminate rage. Among other instances of this nature, the murder of Miss McCrea . . . struck every breast with horror. The young lady is represented to have been in all the innocence of youth and bloom of beauty. . . . Occasion was thence taken to exasperate the people and to blacken the royal party and army . . . they loudly condemned and reprobated that government which could call such auxiliaries into a civil contest; thereby endeavoring as they said, not to subdue but to exterminate a people whom they affected to consider and pretended to reclaim as subjects. . . . Thus an army was poured forth by the woods, mountains and marshes. . . . The Americans recalled their courage, and when their regular army seemed to be entirely wasted the spirit of the country produced a much greater and more formidable force.

Ramsay, II. 36-37. The friends of the royal cause as well as its enemies, suffered from their indiscriminate barbarities. Among other instances, the murder of Miss McCrea excited an universal horror. This young lady, in the innocence of youth and the bloom of beauty. . . . Occasion was thereby given to inflame the populace and to blacken the royal cause . . . and they loudly condemned that government which could call such auxiliaries into a civil contest as were calculated not to subdue but to exterminate a people whom they affected to reclaim as subjects. . . . An army was speedily poured forth from the woods and mountains. When they who had begun the retreat had nearly wasted away, the spirit of the country immediately supplied their place with a much greater and more formidable force.

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton to Col. Laurens, September, 1780. *Official and other Papers of the late Major-General Alexander Hamilton*, N. Y., 1842, I. 458 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Annual Register*, 1781, 45-46; Gordon, III. 488-490; Ramsay, II. 201.

<sup>4</sup> Sparks's *Life of Washington*, VII. 541.

<sup>5</sup> Compare *Annual Register*, 1781, p. 45 and Ramsay, II. 201.

of Lord Dunmore in Virginia this appears very plainly.<sup>1</sup> The accounts of the Revolution on the western frontier as given in Ramsay and Gordon are so similar in a number of places that it is remarkable they have not been traced back to the *Annual Register*. In Winsor we find the following: "The earliest account of the massacre at Wyoming is in a letter written at Poughkeepsie, July 20, 1778,<sup>2</sup> just after the fugitives had arrived there and this account seems to be largely the source whence Gordon, Botta and Marshall drew their accounts . . . Ramsay is reasonably accurate and is free from many errors which characterize the other narratives."<sup>3</sup> Gordon's whole account was taken from the *Annual Register*; and it is equally clear now that Ramsay used the same source, though by abbreviating to a considerable extent he frequently obliterated almost wholly the close resemblance between his copy and the original. Strangely enough Gordon seems to have had in his hands the original account for he makes use of certain words which he could not have obtained from the *Annual Register*.

There remains to be considered the account of events in England and elsewhere out of the colonies. While Ramsay undoubtedly used the material of the *Annual Register* in compiling his accounts, in this part of his work he seems to have abbreviated much more freely, probably from lack of space. It is seldom that a half page can be found verbatim; more often stray phrases copied or whole sentences have been transcribed and appear every now and then in the midst of the abridgments. This has made it much more difficult to trace such plagiarism. A good illustration, however, of a fairly complete copy occurs in his account of Burke's speech in Parliament.<sup>4</sup> In the study of Gordon's history the remark is made in connection with the parallel quotations from the *Annual Register*, Ramsay and Gordon, that Ramsay was never guilty of the gross plagiarism which had disfigured the work of Gordon. At that time the only work of Ramsay's I had studied was his history of the Revolution in South Carolina. It is evident that I must retract my first statement regarding Ramsay and place him on the same level with Gordon. The modified form which Ramsay's plagiarism takes in his earlier work makes it more difficult to secure a perfectly clear case. If we were to believe his own words, we should accept him as an unquestioned authority. In his preface he tells us of his preparation and of his sources and in conclusion says:

<sup>1</sup> *Annual Register*, 1776, p. 27; Ramsay, I. 249.

<sup>2</sup> Almon's *Rembrancer*, 1779, VII. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Winsor, VI. 662-663. "The Indians and the Border Warfare of the Revolution," by Andrew McFarland Davis.

<sup>4</sup> *Annual Register*, 1775, p. 105; Ramsay, I. 168.

"He declares that embracing every opportunity of obtaining genuine information, he has sought for truth, and that he has asserted nothing but what he believes to be a fact."<sup>1</sup> But indeed even in his *History of the Revolution of South Carolina*, we see a beginning of that plagiaristic tendency that rendered his later history so worthless. From Ramsay's account of the siege of Yorktown we extract a portion for comparison with his source.<sup>2</sup> It was one of the more serious charges against Gordon that his plagiarism was conscious on account of his rather obvious attempts to conceal evidences of borrowing. Ramsay seems to have fallen into the same practice more than once, using quotation marks in order to give the impression of a direct quotation from a document. A case of this kind occurs in the description of the siege of Yorktown.<sup>3</sup>

Ramsay's account of the battle of King's Mountain is as characteristic a piece of description as his work contains, and Gordon copied it from the manuscript of the work loaned him by the author. But even here there is a distinct copy from the *Annual Register*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "His book may be regarded as an authority of the first importance." Winsor, VI. 508. "War in the Southern Department," by Edward Channing.

<sup>2</sup> *Annual Register*, 1781, p. 131. Two redoubts, which were advanced about 300 yards on the British left had greatly incommoded the enemy, and still continued to impede their progress. . . . To balance the honor, as well as the duty, between both nations, the attack on one was committed to the Americans and of the other to the French. Col. Hamilton, Washington's aid-de-camp, commanded the American detachment which marched to the assault with unloaded arms; passed the abattis and palisades without waiting to remove them; and attacking the works on all sides at once, carried the redoubt with the utmost rapidity. . . . The French were equally successful on their side but their loss was more considerable . . . and the two redoubts were included in the second parallel by daylight.

Ramsay, II. 323-324. Two redoubts, which were advanced about three hundred yards on the left of the British. greatly impeded the progress of the combined armies. . . . To excite a spirit of emulation, the reduction of one was committed to the French—of the other to the Americans. The latter marched to the assault with unloaded arms, passed the abattis and palisades, and attacking on all sides, carried the redoubt in a few minutes. . . . The French were equally successful on their side . . . but lost a considerable number of men. These two works, which had heretofore embarrassed the operations of the besiegers, by being included in the second parallel, were more subservient to their ulterior designs.

<sup>3</sup> *Annual Register*, 1781, p. 132. . . . and Hamilton, in his report to Marquis de la Fayette, boasts . . . that the soldiery under his command, incapable, as he expresses himself, of imitating examples of barbarity, and forgetting recent provocations, spared every man that ceased to resist.

Ramsay, *Revolution of South Carolina*, 324. . . . in his report of the transaction to the Marquis de la Fayette, mentioned, to the honor of his detachment, "that, incapable of imitating examples of barbarity, and forgetting recent provocations, they spared every man that ceased to resist."

Hamilton's *Works*, N. Y., 1886, VIII. 48, letter to Lafayette, Oct. 15, 1781.

"The killed and wounded of the enemy did not exceed eight. Incapable of imitating examples of barbarity, and forgetting recent provocations, the soldiery spared every man who ceased to resist."

<sup>4</sup> Col. Ferguson at King's Mountain, *Annual Register*, 1781, p. 52; Ramsay, II. 185.

Ramsay must therefore be looked upon much more critically in the future than he has ever yet been in the past. He is guilty of plagiarism so commonly in one work as to condemn it as well-nigh worthless; and in another work he has plagiarized sufficiently to raise in our minds a reasonable suspicion as to his absolute trustworthiness in any portion of his published work. We cannot separate Ramsay, the consistent plagiarist of the later history, from Ramsay, the first class authority on South Carolinian history; the paradox is too striking. It is all the work of one man and one method and certainly neither can be reliable nor wholly honorable, at least from the present standpoint. Our conclusion regarding both Ramsay and Gordon must be that they are no longer authorities at first hand, but are merely discredited and doubtful contemporaries, whose accounts must be severely tested before being taken for truth. Both historians made great professions in their prefaces of having examined large numbers of manuscripts and public documents, both affirmed the impartiality and accuracy of their histories, while at the same time they were taking unverified material from a British magazine wholly without credit, copying not facts merely but the very phrases and wording of whole paragraphs and pages. Each is guilty of this in his own special field, the one in New England, the other in Southern history. Both used the same device of changing indirect discourse into direct, with quotation marks as a means of imparting more life to the narration, and possibly their purpose was, also, to conceal their plagiarism. Each copied from the other and the fault was shared mutually. They lived in a generation of successfully plagiarized histories, some of them anonymous, all of them more or less well received by an uncritical public. It is no wonder, then, that under the stress of financial need and tempted by flattering offers, they compounded with their publishers at the expense of their histories. This group of histories described in the present paper belongs quite largely to the English school and attests the power of the bond which we were thought to sever in 1776 or in 1783. Will it not be profitable, now that the last of the contemporary American historians yields his place of authority, to compile from the *Annual Register* a history of the American Revolution which shall be known for what it is under its true colors? We shall by this means ascertain more exactly what is American and what is English in the great mass of historical writing that has been accumulating for a hundred years. We need, also, it seems equally certain, an authoritative American history of our Revolutionary War.